

Sermon Title: Genuine Love
Biblical Text: Romans 12:9-10
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 12:9-10

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

Few people argue with love. Love is widely regarded as the central moral ethic. Meaning, whether or not you believe in God, if you're a Christian, or someone who is just trying to live a good life ... love is our instinctive guiding light. At least in principle. Love never comes easy. Something always seems to get in the way of love. Otherwise, the world would be a much more loving place. We agree on love but we fail to love. *Why?* Well, I think a few things lie underneath our discord.

When we talk about love we're not always talking about the same thing. We define love differently and we love differently. Not only so, but in the language of our text today, love is not always genuine. Love is not always consistent. Often our loves, regardless of how we define love, are self-serving. We lack courage and honesty, we lack a healthy view of love because we have not been loved well. Perhaps more than anything we fail to love ... especially to love in the way of Jesus, because we're afraid.

The English writer, C.S. Lewis said, *“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make*

sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable ... To love is to be vulnerable" (*The Four Loves*). What Lewis is saying is that, love is costly. And that cost exposes fear. That's what I'd like to talk about today. You see, I think we agree on love but fail to love because love is costly. Especially the brand of love which the Apostle Paul will prescribe to us today.

Paul tells us, *Read Romans 12:9-10 ... Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.* Taking our queues from this passage, centered on the costliness of love, here's how will organize our time today ...

- Love, without *hypocrisy*.
- Love, with *truth*.
- Love, *in the flesh*.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Love, Without Hypocrisy (v.9a, 1

Corinthians 12:31-13:1, Ephesians 4:15)

Paul has just finished explaining that everyone in the Body of Christ, the Church has been given gifts. We've been blessed to bless others. We don't have the same callings and abilities, but we've all been endowed by the same grace for the same

purpose, to serve one another in those unique ways. That's vv.6-8. Here in v.9, Paul shifts from the unique roles and abilities people have within the church to explain what every Christian must do, what every Christians has. Namely, we all love.

Paul does this in a few place—move from lists of gifts to love. In both 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, Paul lists a diversity of gifts into calls everyone to the unity of love. After talking about gifts of miracles and healing and prophesy Paul says to Corinth, *Read 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:1 ... But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* Love is a central and unifying power of any ability or gift. If we haven't loved our service to one another is stripped of virtue. We've all experienced someone who arrogantly uses their gifts to power over people rather than bless and love them. You see, the merit of a gift is predicated upon the posture or heart by which we exercise that gift. *Are you with me?* That's especially true in the Church. Our various gifts are meant to foster unity and affection, not competition and jealousy. That's why Paul moves from lists to love.

Paul does a similar thing when he writes to Christians in Ephesus. After telling them that some are called to be prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers, he says, *Read Ephesians 4:15 ... Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...* Of all the true things we might say to each other through our various gifts, everything we say must be said in love. That's how maturity really happens. Paul is telling us something powerful: love grows people more than gifts. Think about it. You might remember a preacher's one-liner for awhile and it may really help you understand God better.

However, when someone loves you well, it reorients your life. *Love grows people more than gifts.*

In the local church, love is the centerpiece of our all service. If someone heals or preaches or financially supports but doesn't love, their gift is of little consequence in the spiritual realm. You might have good stories to tell. You might have big budgets and big buildings. But without love nothing matters in God's economy. Here's how Paul explains it to the Romans, ***Read Romans 12:9a ... Let love be genuine.*** The word for love is *agape*. It's one of many common words used in the Greek language which are all translated as love in English. *Eros* is sexual love. *Philia* is friendship love. *Storage* is familial love. *Philautia* is self-love. *Xenia* is love of the stranger. But *agape* is different. Before the writings of the New Testament, *agape* was of little consequence in Greek culture. Biblical writers however embraced it and attached it to God, so to speak. Since then the word morphed into conveying an affection which is both sacrificial and unconditionally. Additionally, Marva Dawn explains that *agape's*, ***"application to God emphasized his being able to give love wisely, thoroughly, without any demand of return, freely"*** (*Truly the Community*, 144). *Agape* is intelligent, rather than sentimental. It's sacrificial, rather than selfish. It's unconditional, rather than transactional.

All of this meaning is contained within Paul's phrase, ***"let love be genuine."*** He says, let *agape* be genuine. Or really, because there's no verb in this phrase and love comes with a direct article, he's literally saying ... ***the love—unhypocritical.*** *Agape* love is meant to be a love free from hypocrisy. In the Bible hypocrisy is all about alignment with the will of God both in our inward life and visible life. This is what the rest of the chapter is about ... what it means to love, without hypocrisy.

Movement 2: Love, With Truth (v.9b, Matthew 23:25, Psalm 5:4-6, Mark 10:18, Luke 14:26)

The first thing Paul tells us about unhypocritical love is that it's inseparable from the truth. *Read Romans 12:9b ... **Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*** As we mentioned, one of the reasons we agree on love but fail to love is because we don't define love clearly. Often love is understood as a personalized expression of natural affection. In other words, we often presume that genuine love is about following the inclinations of our hearts and desires. *Love genuine if it's genuine to me.* But the Scriptures contest this perspective in a number of ways.

One day Jesus told a group of religious leaders, *Read Matthew 23:25 ... **"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean."*** He was saying, *let love be genuine. Seek harmony between your interior life and exterior life.* But notice, it's not just about alignment. It's also about purification. Cleansing needs to happen from the inside out. Biblically, being genuine or free from hypocrisy is not simply about being true to our inward self. Loving without hypocrisy requires repentance, purification, and healing. In other words, biblically, hypocrisy is not about betraying yourself it's about betraying God. I think that's critical for us to understand in our day. Being genuine is about aligning ourselves with God, not a seeking a God or friends or loves who aligns with us.

In Romans then, Paul is following the teachings of Jesus. The Apostle is saying something very different from our prevailing cultural ideal. Specifically, he's

telling us that agape (love) *hates evil*. And love is supposed to be fixated, or really what he says is, *glued* to what is good. Evil and goodness are not relative ideas. These are not constructions of our cultural moment. These are reflections of God's character and holiness. A love without hypocrisy manifests in abhorring what is contrary to God's character and holding fast to what he calls good.

- God hates evil. In fact, the Psalms even tell us that his hatred goes beyond action to the people who commit evil. ***Read Psalm 5:4-6 ... For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.*** God hates evil and evildoers because they destroy what he loves. His love would be hypocritical if he did not defend, execute justice, and seek to destroy evil, because evil destroys what he loves. Perhaps one of the reasons we don't hate evil like God does is because we don't remember what God sees and knows about evil. We forget that evil destroys God's good world and works against his holy will. To be idle in the face of what is evil is to fail to love without hypocrisy because that betrays God.
- God is good. When we say that God is good, we're saying that the definition of goodness flows from his character. When a rich young man came to Jesus and called him "Good Teacher," Jesus wryly responds, ***Read Mark 10:18 ... "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."*** Theologically speaking, goodness is one of God's moral attributes. He is the highest good and all that is good, reflects his quality and character. Theologian Louis Berkhof says that God ***"is the fountain of all good."*** When we hold fast to what is good, we are clinging to anything and

everything that reflects his quality and character. If we want to know if something is good, we must consider it alongside God himself. And to love without hypocrisy to do the good, cherish the good, protect the good, surrender to the good ... allow ourselves to be glued to what is good.

Loving without hypocrisy means loving with truth.

It means hating evil.

It means clinging to good.

Another reason we agree with love but fail to love is because we don't define evil and good as we should. In fact, more to the point we don't define them at all. We presume good, and we often ignore evil until it destroys something we love. Love then has become a sort of live and let live edict. Certainly there is a natural and genuine impulse to protect the marginalized, oppressed, and suffering (something which is perfectly in line with the heart of God.) But without a firm grasp on truth we often disagree about who is marginalized, oppressed, and suffering. Without a clear understanding of truth and evil and good, perhaps unwittingly, we cling to evil and hate what's good. In other words, in the name of love we reject truth.

One of the ways this has most poignantly gripped our cultural moment is through the mantra, "love is love." The heart behind this ideal is that every human being should be able to choose who they love and how they love. While this sounds noble and generous, it ultimately fails to capture the heart of the God who hates evil and is good. Remember, being genuine is about aligning with our Creator. Some people live by this mantra. Others shame people for living by it. Both I think need to learn afresh to let love be genuine. Love is not love. Human love is not simply an irrefutable reason unto itself. Love is complex. And Paul is teaching us,

it must be genuine. It must be without hypocrisy. It must hate whatever God hates. It must embrace whatever God embraces. In other words, love is not a personalized expression. Love is not a matter of self-fulfillment. Love is a matter of self-denial.

Self-denial is not a practice for only some people. Author Rebecca MacLaughlin explains that, *"Most Christians struggle at times with attractions that, if followed, would lead them into ... sin"* (*Secular Creed*, 35). Following Jesus is about denying yourselves. Salvation and sanctification put to death things within us which are contrary to the way of Jesus. Specifically, Jesus redefines love for us. That's costly. It's costly to let someone else define love for us. Allowing God to define evil and good is unpopular and it takes courage. Which is the other reason why we agree with love, but fail to love. Love is costly. Jesus told his disciples, *Read Luke 14:26 ... "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."* Loving Jesus is about forsaking all other loves. It does not necessarily mean we abandon all relationships. Rather it means Jesus becomes our central affection through which all other affections fall in due subordination.

Movement 3: Love, In the Flesh (v.10, John 1:14,

Colossians 2:13-14)

Jesus has a ton of integrity when it comes to love. Every advent season we celebrate that love was not sent merely in written or spoken form ... love came in the flesh. John tells us, *Read John 1:14 ... "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."* Jesus is the Son of God in the flesh. Love *in the flesh*. In

Jesus we see the fullest expression of love without *hypocrisy*; a love which never betrays the Heavenly Father. In Jesus we see the fullest expression of love with *truth*; a love which hates evil and always embraces the good.

Out of love, Jesus abhorred evil. So much so that not only did he never sin, but he nailed sin to the cross. Paul told the Colossians, *Read Colossians 2:13-14 ... And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross*. Evil deceives and destroys what God loves. Namely his people. And so in Christ, God nailed evil to the cross. That's what God thinks about evil. That's what God does to evil. That's good news for us. If any evil is tormenting you ... if any evil has seized you ... if you have held fast to any evil ... in Christ, love in the flesh, God promises to destroy whatever destroys you. That's how he loves. That's how he loves you.

Out of love, Jesus held fast to good. We see this in his life but most powerfully in his resurrection. The resurrection will one day result in the restoration or remaking of the whole world. Which is not a destruction of the whole world, rather it's the reclaiming of creation's original goodness. When Jesus returns the dead in Christ will rise, in bodily form and spend forever, in the flesh with God and one another in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the Beloved Community." This resurrected people will live a new resurrected world. Today that resurrection has begun. Through the resurrection and the resurrection life we live, God is bringing heaven to earth. This changes how we cling to the good today.

Here's how scholar N.T. Wright explains it,

“The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it...). They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom” (Surprised by Hope).

In his resurrection, Jesus is clinging to the good, he is holding on to the good of this world and bringing about the kingdom goodness by goodness.

Love, without hypocrisy, a love fully alive with the truth ... rejects and even destroys evil it's glued to the good and even restores the good. That's what Jesus does. That's what his love is like. He accomplishes all of this by taking on flesh ... dying in the flesh ... and rising from the dead in the flesh. It's a costly love. It's a vulnerable love. It's a genuine love.